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SUBJECT: CROSS RIVER AND AKWA IBOM: WAITING PEACEFULLY FOR
DIVIDENDS OF DEMOCRACY

REF: 2003 LAGOS 2293

1. (U) Summary. On a recent familiarization visit to the southeastern States of Cross River and Akwa Ibom, PolOffs found officials with many plans for economic development in the region. All are targeting agriculture and tourism as a way to diversify and lessen dependence on income from oil. Private citizens are forming and funding social service organizations to provide services the new democratically elected governments can not. There was no evidence that four years of civilian government after a decade of military rule has improved the quality of life of the average citizen in these States. End summary.

Calabar - The famous Obudu Ranch and the infamous Charles Taylor

2. (SBU) The Cross River region, renowned for its beauty and bio-diversity, has been a definable area of Nigeria since pre-colonial time. Its population of around two million ethnic Efiks, Ejagham and Bekwara has not migrated to other regions nor mixed with other ethnic groups. Though the actual borders have varied, there has been a Cross River State since Nigerian independence in 1960 and its capital has always been the ancient trading city of Calabar. One of Cross River's claims to fame these days is the Obudu Cattle Ranch, established in 1951. The "Ranch" is the State's often-touted hope for the development of a revenue-generating tourist industry sufficient to relieve its dependence on oil income. Calabar was most recently in the news because it is the place the Government of Nigeria (GON) offered as asylum to the former President of Liberia, Charles Taylor. Taylor has been charged with committing war crimes against Liberia and other African countries. However, PolOffs visited Cross River State the week of February 9, and saw neither the "Ranch" nor Charles Taylor. In fact, the universal responses to our questions about the whereabouts or future of Taylor in Nigeria, were averted eyes, uneasy laughter and attempts to direct the conversation elsewhere -- to the "Ranch", for instance.

But what have you done for me lately? - A meeting with the Speaker of the Assembly

3. (SBU) PolOff and PolSpec met with Cross River Speaker of the State House of Assembly, the Hon. Bassey Eko Ewa, Esq., and several officials in charge of State Ministries. Officials in charge of agricultural development did not attend, and the Speaker told us that there is no separate ministry for tourism. At the end of prepared welcoming remarks, the Speaker turned to what the USG could do for Cross River. He said the State would be pleased to send Assembly Members to participate in democracy-building seminars in the US, or any exchange program for legislators between our two countries. He said there had been no follow-up to a 1999 USAID-sponsored democracy workshop and seminar in which Cross River legislators had participated and that they had found very useful. He then asked a public affairs official to take over the briefing. This official gave us a summary of the State government's plans for the next four years. He said Cross River suffers from an unemployment rate of around 50% which the administration of Governor Donald Duke plans to address mainly through agricultural development. The government wants to promote a return to "money crops" such as palm oil nuts and rubber that were profitable for Cross River in the distant past. Also encouraged is the planting of potentially lucrative new crops such as pineapple. The government has announced it will provide "soft money" (low/no interest, easy repayment) micro-loans to unemployed men and women, as well as free fertilizer to jump-start its agricultural plans. The government plans to focus also on security to entice private investors. The Polytechnic Training College in Calabar has been upgraded to University status (complete with medical and law schools). This official predicted that future graduates of the University would find jobs created by the private investors enticed to Calabar by the improved security.

4. (SBU) Cross River is, like the rest of Nigerian States,

dependent for its operating budget on the Federal Government's allocation to it of a share of national oil revenues. Not surprisingly, Cross River officials claim their allocation is insufficient and the smallest in the nation. In addition, the State wants to address another problem plaguing the Nigerian economy: there are almost no good jobs in the private sector, so most of the work force works for the government or goes into the military. The State has two top priority projects to address these problems. It is developing a free trade zone about five kilometers outside the city of Calabar. The project is named "Tinapa" which means "fun and leisure" in the local Efik language and is expected to bring in about 300 jobs. In addition, a large part of the current budget is reportedly devoted to the promotion, maintenance and further development of the Obudu Ranch, which everyone in Cross River hopes will bring in additional private sector investment and jobs.

15. (SBU) Comment. Tourism, as a way to diversify away from a dependence on oil, may be a non-starter for Cross River (reftel). There is no capital investment in capacity (hotels, motels, restaurants etc.), in infrastructure (reliable electricity, potable water, passable roads), and no trained labor pool or training currently available. The recently upgraded University of Calabar, like every other university and technical school in Nigeria, has no courses in hotel management, culinary arts, or travel and leisure services. PolOffs spent two nights in the best hotel in Calabar. Every room we saw was dirty, fixtures were hanging from walls, faucets leaked rusty water, and it was obvious that nothing had been properly repaired or replaced in years. Not one single item on the breakfast menu was available at the hotel "restaurant", the tablecloths were dirty from the previous night's dinner customers (and stayed dirty for our two day stay), and managers as well as servers were obviously untrained.

16. (SBU) Comment contd. We also visited a fish farm and outdoor restaurant built a few years ago by a local physician. Half a dozen grounds keepers were languidly raking up the few pieces of debris on the paths through this attractive, garden-like setting. The actual ponds where the fish breeding is done and that supply the restaurant were so stagnant and choked with algae that we could not see the fish until one of the grounds keepers threw crumbled crackers in the water. Then hundreds of fish, so many that they appeared to be one animal, boiled to the surface of the green and slimy water. We also visited the Calabar National Museum, which is well-kept and housed in the former residence of the colonial governor. After waking up the two attendants dozing in the afternoon heat in the gift shop, we noted that the last visitor had signed the guest book four month prior. There was a two month gap between him and the next previous visitor.

17. (U) Comment contd. Two weeks after our visit, newspapers reported that the federal Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) had been demanding payment of "license fees" from Cross River hotels and restaurants. Governor Donald Duke issued a statement saying that "henceforth no hotelier or hospitality operator...should pay monies...to (the NTDC) until further instructions are received from the newly established Cross River State Tourism Board which is the body regulating tourism and hospitality business in the State." End comment.

A few good women

18. (U) In addition to familiarization with the region, a goal of the visit was to establish or re-establish contact with NGOs in the area. PolOffs visited the Director of the Women in Detention Rights Initiative (WDRI), Margaret Okopko. Okopko is a practicing lawyer and was recently named a Special Advisor to the Governor for Women's Affairs working with the State's First Lady on these issues. She told us that she started WDRI in 1999 and has, with occasional contributions from friends, funded it almost 100 per cent with her own money since then. She says that, five years ago, she was visiting a (male) client in a Calabar jail when she heard a baby crying. She went looking for the source of the crying and discovered a woman and infant sitting on the floor in the hallway of one of the cell blocks. The woman told her that her husband had her arrested for domestic violence, and she and her child had been sleeping and sitting in the hall for three days. Okopko left, rallied a group of her friends, and went back two days later to help the woman. This was the beginning of WDRI. She, and her staff of three, try to provide free legal services in six southeast States. Currently there are about thirty women detained in their region; five in and around Calabar. She says the organization wants to expand and enhance its services, and especially to develop educational programs that will change the treatment of Nigerian women accused of crime. Okopko says that a woman charged with a crime can be incarcerated indefinitely and will certainly, immediately, and probably permanently, be ostracized. This happens without formal

charges, trial, conviction or any other examination of facts.

Okopko would, obviously, like help funding her organization's activities, and we advised her to submit program proposals for consideration.
University of Calabar

19. (U) The University of Calabar has a large and well maintained campus and boasts a student population of more than 15,000. We met with Georgette Antigha, who manages the University's health education programs dealing with HIV/AIDS, STDs, teen pregnancy, and illegal drug use. She is also a Professor of Theater Arts in the Drama Department. Antigha said the University program started in 1991 with funding from several sources, including UNICEF and USAID. She said that, since the first Nigerian HIV/AIDS case was found in Cross River, programs like the one at the University are accepted and have benefited from high visibility early on. At one point, the program was reaching thirty new students per week. Funding began to dry up in 1999 and now the program reaches only about sixty students per year. To maximize the impact of the program, Antigha says they have revamped the program to a "train the trainers" format. Students volunteer and pay a token fee for the training. She said she would like to see the program reach even more university students than it did in the beginning, as well as extend to secondary students. We encouraged her to submit program proposals.

Akwa Ibom - More good women

10. (U) Akwa Ibom was part of Cross River until it became a State in 1987. The majority of its population of about three million are ethnic Ibibio, Annang and Oron, which lends logic to separating it from the administrative control of members of the three different ethnic groups that make up the population of Cross River. Akwa Ibom is also one of the oil-producing Delta States that has a sea coast as its southern border. In addition to its federal allocation of revenues from on-shore production, the recent GON move to allow the States a greater share in off-shore production will add significantly to Akwa Ibom's operating funds. Our contact in Akwa Ibom, Comfort Umanah, is a young, energetic union leader. She is an organizer and representative for the State's radio and television workers, and very well known to State officials up to and including the Governor.

11. (U) We met with Deputy Majority Whip of the State House of Assembly Mabel Udongwo who is also chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Women, Children and the Media. Udongwo lamented the fact that there are few women in politics nationally as well as in Akwa Ibom. She said this was due more to cultural factors than to lack of financial backing. Although women are a majority of the Nigerian population, fifty percent of them are illiterate, and most girls, particularly in the villages, are not encouraged to aspire beyond an elementary education. In addition, most Nigerians consider politics a violent business for men only, and few husbands would encourage their wives to enter the political arena. Politics for Udongwo, however, is a family affair. Mr. Udongwo is a Local Government (LG) Chairman and encouraged his wife, then working as a professor of management at the Polytechnic Institute, to run for LG office. She says she saved for ten years to finance her campaign herself because she wanted to "be where the action is." She ran twice and lost, but on her third try she aimed higher and won a seat in the House of Assembly. She has formed her own NGO, Women in Politics, because she says "Women are more honest and sincere than men and, thus, are able to fight corruption better." Udongwo says she has 26 local women ready and able to run for LG office on March 27, and her aim is to get at least ten women into the House of Assembly in the 2007 elections. Her focus has been on grassroots issues such as poverty, potable water, reliable electricity, good roads, and she has sponsored the State's first agricultural development bill.

The "Bag Man"

12. (SBU) The Governor's Political Advisor, Udo Ekpengyong, could not tear himself away from the televised quarterfinal of the All-Africa Soccer Championships to talk with us very long. When he did, he had several long-standing complaints about Mobil Oil Company's operations in the State that he wanted USG help in resolving. According to Ekpengyong, Akwa Ibom had attracted the oil companies because it can produce at least two thousand barrels per day and has no political or security problems. (Comment. Actually, Mobil reported that its Akwa Ibom operations produced over 500,000 barrels per day in 2003. End comment.) He complained that Mobil has 100 percent of its operations in Akwa Ibom, yet has never fully compensated the State for environmental damage caused by those operations. In addition, Mobil keeps its office and in-country staff in Lagos. Ekpengyong says Mobil should move all staff, administration, and the jobs they engender to Akwa Ibom. He continued saying that, in addition to moving jobs from Lagos, Mobil needs to offer scholarships to Akwa Ibom's restless, unemployed youth. Without this "encouragement" and

hope for a brighter future, the youths might "explode" in violence and unrest, making it difficult to do business in Akwa Ibom. When asked what are the most pressing political issues on which he was advising the Governor, Ekpengyong said there are no pressing political issues in Akwa Ibom at this time. He said there was no problem with the 2003 elections and the State is not adding new LGs, so there will be no problem with the 2004 elections. He ended our meeting saying that the Governor, also, is focused on grassroots issues such as electricity, clean water, and fighting corruption. He said that all day, from very early in the morning, he had been seeing supplicants in his office and been giving out money to help the people.

The Speaker is upbeat

13. (SBU) Affable House Speaker Nelson A. Efiong cut short a committee meeting to meet with us late in the afternoon on our last day in the Southeast. He told us straight-away that his wife and children are American citizens and that, as Mrs. Efiong had said she never wanted to live in Nigeria, both she and the children were living in the US. Efiong said he and his wife had met and married while they were in college in Texas. Both were settled into careers in the US when governor Victor Attah asked him to return and be a part of his government. Efiong said the Governor had been stymied in his first term by "disgruntled losers", but now the administration is moving on important issues such as streamlining the civil service, internal security, building and maintaining infrastructure, agricultural development, and encouraging private investment in the State. He proudly noted that the Champion Beer Company, once a major employer in the capital city of Uyo, had recently been bought by an Indian group. He said that the Champion factory has resumed production and local distribution, and planned national distribution by the end of 2004. In addition, he said that the Meridian Hotels are committed to developing the Nwaniba Tourist Center on the sea coast. Plans for the Tourist Center include a five-star hotel.

Politics - No problem

14. (U) Although several states are still wrestling with the local government issue, Efiong said Akwa Ibom does not have this problem. The State set up its LGs using the parliamentary system rather than a presidential system. According to Efiong, this is a more efficient and less expensive way to run the LG system, and it insures more State oversight of how the LGs are run. On the question of whether the State would create new LGs, he said that the recent federal decision on the on-shore off-shore allocation of oil revenues would bring more money into the State, thus doing away with the need for additional LGs. Efiong said the Governor wants the people of Akwa Ibom to see the "dividends of democracy" in a government that serves the people and meets their needs. The administration is interested in U. S. seminars, workshops, and exchange programs for legislators.

15. (SBU) Comment. It is becoming clearer that, after years of watching military dictators and their cronies loot the national treasury, most Nigerians believed that the way to "spread the wealth" and "get a piece of the action" is to put on the trappings of democratic government. Talking to second term officials is "deja vu all over again." Most have spent the past four years of elected government building mansions, stashing cash and paying off past and future supporters. Most still spout grandiose plans for future development and better lives for citizens, but country-wide the roads are in terrible shape, teachers at every level are not paid and constantly on strike, electricity is unavailable or unreliable, and even in the major cities drinking water is delivered by truck -- and only to those who can afford it. Some States have passed agricultural development legislation, but none of the officials we spoke to could point to a single State-funded agricultural project. Every official we have spoken to has put a high priority on developing tourism to generate jobs and revenue, but none could cite ancillary development necessary to a successful tourism industry. By the 2007 general elections, Nigerians will have waited eight years for the "dividends of democracy" to make a difference in the quality of life of the average citizen. Those elections will tell what type civil society Nigerians want.

GREGOIRE